

A couple weeks ago I commented that I've thought a lot about public employees and public service over the last year. In that column I discussed Evansville's efforts for top-notch service: an emphasis on improving operations and service, best management practices and professionalism, and third party recognition. This week I elaborate with thoughts on city management.

My philosophy of management basically comes down to, "You can't do it by yourself." I view it as being part of a team of elected officials and staff. Evansville has a team of elected officials and staff committed to working in the community's interest. We're all in this together, and each and every employee contributes to the city's mission of a thriving and prosperous community. The people who work here add value; they contribute to the wellbeing of the community.

### **Teamwork**

I say "team" in part because it is a reflex term, but also as an aspiration toward the ideal. In reality we have something much more along the lines of a "working group." In his recent book The Advantage, Patrick Lencioni describes the difference this way, "A good way to understand a working group is to think of it like a golf team, where players go off and play on their own and then get together and add up their scores at the end of the day. A real team is more like a basketball team, one that plays together simultaneously, in an interactive, mutually dependent, and often interchangeable way."

Certain technical skills or licenses are going to prevent the interchangeable aspect of a team. But collaboration, going beyond mere cooperation, is a very real possibility. And one to aspire toward.

Over the weekend I visited a neighboring village. The police talked about how they work together with the public works department. The library talked about how the public works department helps them. The public works department talked about work with the finance department for long-range planning. Finance staff talked about work with the police. I realized they were putting their best foot forward, but it was impressive and I was a bit jealous at their having such a cohesive team.

### **Community Service**

At a July 2011 Committee of the Whole meeting, we posed the question, "What is the purpose of The City of Evansville as an organization?" Common themes among the answers included: top-notch, quality service and quality of life to the citizens (residents and businesses) in a positive, courteous, and cost-effective manner.

This theme of top-notch service has been a recurring discussion the last couple of years. In my last column I discussed top-notch service: an emphasis on improving operations and service, best management practices and professionalism, and third party recognition. Our business is about people; we provide services for our residents and businesses.

A culture of community service needs to be hardwired into the organization, and it starts at the top. In The Advantage, Lencioni also mentions "Team Number One." There needs to be a collective mentality among the leadership team that their number one priority is to the

organization, not loyalty to an individual department or committee. Staying true to the organization's values and culture – breaking down traditional silos – is imperative.

### **Strategic Thinking**

As the city's governing body, the Common Council should examine existing routines and explore innovative strategies (and/or encourage staff to). The way we performed in the past may have been the best approach then, but it might be less productive for the future. And some short-term action should be seen as a means to a greater end, not as the end in and of itself.

The Common Council is responsible for setting the framework of the city's strategic issues, its fundamental policy questions, and its challenges for the future. This is a mindset of steering, not rowing. It means getting beyond a catch phrase like "top-notch service" and defining it in terms of specific priorities for safety, quality of life, and other public benefits.

We need to give thought, deliberate thought, to the end game – the priorities we wish to emphasize and to achieve. Obviously, such priorities need to be aligned with the vision for community service. And operations such as work procedures and decision-making systems need to share the same alignment. It is not something to rush through; priorities need to be well-thought out.

### **Participatory**

I believe a participatory approach, inviting and respecting all input and views, is essential to maintaining trust in the work environment. We need to provide an environment in which all employees have an opportunity for meaningful participation. Our employees are essential to providing high-quality services. Those closest to a problem or procedure tend to have the best insight into how to better it.

I may grumble sometimes, but I do keep an open door policy with staff, the City Council, and with the public. And I try to keep a consult-and-decide approach during department head and other staff meetings. I try to balance all sides of an issue and keep a big picture view of how the parts fit together.

Discussions at recent Committee of the Whole and other meetings have been structured around improving trust and team orientation. The focus is on services, not departments. We have emphasized improved internal communications – for example, starting weekly bullet-point updates and developing reference handbooks for the City Council and committees.

### **Accountability**

We should expect to constantly perform at a high-quality level; mediocre doesn't cut it. And the status quo doesn't cut it; top-notch service emphasizes improving operations.

I believe in treating employees as responsible adults and expecting as much in return. Good management handles employees fairly and respectfully, and it regards similarly situated people consistently. It promptly recognizes and rewards good behavior, and it promptly guides underperformers toward better productivity.

However, as a matter of personal responsibility and accountability, I fundamentally believe that you lead your own performance.

We have parts, certainly not all, of the aspects of public management I list here. And sometimes it ebbs and flows. After all, with an emphasis on continuous improvement, it should be expected that there will be more to do.

In my next column I will round out this discussion with a focus on accountability and managing for results.